

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 341 747

UD 028 505

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TITLE School Choice: Pros, Cons, and Concerns. ASPIRA Issue Brief.
INSTITUTION ASPIRA Association, Inc., Washington, DC. National Office.
SPONS AGENCY Department of Education, Washington, DC.
PUB DATE 91
CONTRACT S201D80010-90
NOTE 5p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142)

EDRS PRICE MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS *Decision Making; Educational Finance; Educational Improvement; *Educational Vouchers; Elementary Secondary Education; *Federal Legislation; Free Choice Transfer Programs; *Low Income Groups; *Parent Responsibility; Policy Formation; Poverty; Private Schools; Public Schools; *School Choice; School Desegregation; Tuition Grants

IDENTIFIERS America 2000

ABSTRACT

This paper explores issues surrounding parental choice of schools. The administration of President George Bush has presented parental choice as a cornerstone of its proposed "America 2000 Excellence in Education Act." Educational advocates are concerned that emphasis on choice as a key moving force for school reform falls short of the mark, and that implementation requires safeguards that the program does not contain. Supporters of choice argue that it will: (1) empower low-income and minority families; (2) allow competitive and free-market principles to force educational improvement; (3) offer a low-cost solution to problems of the educational system; and (4) incite schools to change to meet community needs. Opponents contend that choice would: (1) infringe on desegregation efforts; (2) deplete financial resources for public schools through vouchers spent at private schools; (3) not allow for adequate transportation for real choice; (4) make informed choice difficult or impossible for limited-English-proficient or poorly educated parents; and (5) not provide for change in poor schools. Policymakers and educators have prepared a list of 13 criteria a choice plan must meet. Definitions of terms used in the choice arguments are listed, and the bills offered in America 2000 and by Senator E. Kennedy are contrasted. (SLD)

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ASPIRA. ISSUE BRIEF

School Choice: Pros, Cons, and Concerns

The current wave of education reform being initiated by President Bush, the corporate community, and the Department of Education is fueled by a growing concern over national competitiveness. President Bush's America 2000 is the federal government's master design which details their priorities and goals. In it, President Bush, speaking of the state of education, states:

"Serious efforts at education improvement are under way by most of our international competitors and trading partners. Yet while we spend as much per student as almost any country in the world, American students are at or near the back of the pack in international comparisons. If we don't make radical changes, that is where they are going to stay" (*America 2000 Sourcebook*, Department of Education).

A look at the depressing statistics on the educational achievement of the nation's youth confirms a need to recapture much lost talent. Thus, in an attempt to remedy the problems plaguing the education system, President Bush has introduced in Congress Senate Bill 1141, the "America 2000 Excellence in Education Act". This bill is significant for elevating education to a level of national priority and for stimulating discussions about the most effective means of improving education.

The Bush administration presents its parental choice program as the cornerstone of the bill and as the most effective means of school improvement. This emphasis on parental choice has generated much concern in educational advocacy circles. Education advocates are concerned that the emphasis on choice as a key moving force for education reform falls short of the mark. They affirm that effective implementation requires safeguards which the President's version does not contain. Some would throw out the choice strategy entirely, indicating that it is unproven and not worthy of so much time and resources.

In introducing his plan, President Bush indicated that his attempt is to create "market-based accountability," and empower economically disadvantaged students to choose among better schools. His plan would include private schools through the conversion of Chapter 1 funds into vouchers. He and Secretary of Education Lamar Alexander spearhead the school choice movement.

Reasons which supporters offer in favor of choice include the following:

- * It will empower low-income and minority families to avoid poorly managed and impoverished schools.
- * It allows competitive, free-market principles to force the public education system to either improve its

schools or close them.

- * It is a low-cost solution to the problems found in the education system.
- * It will goad schools to change in an effort to meet the needs of the community.

Those who criticize the President's plan view it as an inadequate means to improve education. They argue that choice would be effective only under the proper conditions. They fear that school choice would exacerbate existing problems as well as create a proliferation of educational inequities. In states where it is currently in effect, the students who most often utilize the choice option are those from the most advantaged backgrounds who tend to be better informed of their options. Advocates concerns regarding choice include:

- * Choice would infringe on desegregation efforts as parents would use the power of school choice to circumvent court-ordered integration.
- * Use of vouchers would deplete resources for public schools by transferring these funds to private schools. (Under the Bush proposal, each eligible child could take a portion of the funds their school receives under the Chapter 1 program to serve disadvantaged children and use it as an individual payment to a private school.)
- * Inadequate transportation would keep students from attending schools which they would like to attend. Increasing the availability of transportation would cost money, not save it.
- * Limited English proficient parents and those with low levels of schooling would have a difficult time receiving the necessary information to decide which would be the best school for their children.
- * Schools which are less popular with parents and children could still contain enough students that they could not simply close, and so the students remaining in them would continue to receive an inferior education.

"We all know that, historically, when parents have been given the choice of leaving schools, white parents have chosen all white schools," stated Sheryl Denbo, the executive director of the American University's Mid-Atlantic Equity Center in Washington, DC. Desegregation advocates worry that while choice is not inherently employed as a resegregation tool, it has the potential to be used as one.

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The nation's largest teacher union, the National Education Association, argues that without proper precautions in place, choice could divide the education system. If the most advantaged students choose to leave, their departure hurts those students who remain in the impoverished schools because they cannot benefit from learning alongside these students. Keith Geiger, President of the National Education Association, points out that "the solution to the funding and social inequities that condemn children in inner cities and other impoverished areas to inferior schools is not to encourage the flight of the most promising students," ("Choosing Universal Excellence", *The Washington Post*, May 19, 1991). Geiger asserts that choice could create "a two-tiered education system even more stratified along economic and racial lines."

Dr. José Cárdenas, executive director of the Intercultural Development Research Association, echoes this concern:

"This denial of choice for the school segment most in need of educational opportunity will lead to the mass exodus of white, middle-class students from the central city schools, resulting in the dual system so common in other countries, where the upper and middle classes attend private schools and the public schools resemble charity institutions for those who have nowhere else to go" ("America 2000," *IDRA Newsletter*, June 1991).

Choice presents an enticing concept: producing better schools through market driven competition and little governmental expenditure.

Although choice is a procedure about which little comprehensive research has been done, some programs do exist which have proven choice could hold some merit. For example, East Harlem District 4 in New York City has a choice program that is widely applauded for allowing poor minority students to achieve in school. Yet it is significant to note that District 4 attributes its success not only to choice but to strong teacher and parent involvement that stretches over fifteen years.

Policy makers and educators who would support a limited choice program have begun considering the types of criteria for educational equity that choice or any education reform program should meet. Their suggested criteria include:

1. The program should be part of a broad-based school reform movement in the district.
2. The program cannot result in segregation based upon race, religion, color, national origin, sex, or handicap, nor can it impede the progress of desegregation among the schools in the State.
3. The program should arise out of the needs of each local district, not be mandated by the state or federal government.
4. The program must ensure that parents have been involved in its design.
5. All parents in the community must have an equal opportunity to choose among the schools for their

children, and all children must have an equal opportunity to benefit from the program.

6. Comprehensive information and advice on all options must be available in a language understandable to the parents. Outreach efforts must be particularly focused on the parents of disadvantaged children and those who are limited-English proficient.
7. The program should provide for adequate resources to ensure quality education programs for every student.
8. The participating school system must devise methods to develop access to the schools, such as free and appropriate transportation to school and extracurricular activities and the payment of school fees which the child cannot afford.
9. A fair and equitable process must be used when selecting students for programs that have more eligible applicants than space available.
10. An evaluation process must be intact from the beginning to measure the participation and achievement rates of students, particularly disadvantaged students, with a view towards the equity of the choice program.
11. A plan must be available to the local educational agency or a consortium of local educational agencies in cooperation with community-based and parent organizations to target and improve those schools which are the least popular with parents.
12. Student assignment and transfer policies cannot discriminate on the basis of handicapping conditions.
13. English as a Second Language and special education classes must be made accessible for students regardless of the school they choose to attend.

Clearly, meeting the above criteria would not be inexpensive, but these criteria must be seriously looked at if this nation is to maintain its commitment to equal opportunity at a time when Latinos and other minorities form a growing proportion of the student population. Choice may stimulate some improvements, but can it sufficiently overhaul our education system to ensure that every student has an equal opportunity to high quality education? This should be the ultimate goal of any reform package. Educational reform must strive to give all students and parents an equal choice between equally good schools.

This Issue Brief was written by Danielle Dunne for the ASPIRA Association, Inc., National Office. Special thanks to the Everett Philanthropic Fund, which funded Ms. Dunne's time through their Public Service Internship Program.

This document was produced under the Hispanic Community Mobilization for Dropout Prevention Project. Major funding provided by U.S. Department of Education grant S201D80010-90.

Defining Choice

Choice, the key strategy for President Bush's education reform, has generated strong support as well as ardent opposition. The burgeoning debate has resulted in a proliferation of buzzwords to describe the different programs which provide options and flexibility in school assignment, from open-enrollment to magnet schools. The following is a list of programs and their meanings.

INTERDISTRICT CHOICE - This program refers to options that allow parents to choose a school outside the district in which they reside. Open enrollment is an example of interdistrict choice.

OPEN ENROLLMENT - Refers to an option which has unrestricted, open boundaries between the school districts of the state.

The Minnesota Open-Enrollment Plan is the most widely recognized interdistrict choice program. A child may attend any school within the state.

INTRADISTRICT CHOICE - Under this option parents choose among schools that are within their own district. The magnet school or alternative school or program, limited open enrollment, and teacher-initiated schools are all demonstrations of intradistrict choice.

MAGNET SCHOOL / ALTERNATIVE SCHOOL OR PROGRAMS - These schools were created to serve a variety of purposes, including 1) providing an academically enriched program, an experimental method of instruction, or a special curricular theme, and 2) acting as a voluntary desegregation plan--often used to attract white middle-class students into minority neighborhoods. Alternative schools can include a wide range of partnerships which are developed to provide a different learning style for the students.

An example of an alternative school is the ASPIRA Alternative High School in Chicago, Illinois, which is a state-accredited and diploma-granting school serving Latino students who had previously dropped out of regular high schools.

CONTROLLED CHOICE / LIMITED OPEN ENROLLMENT - These are plans which were created to promote desegregation and to improve school districts. These plans allow parents to choose among the schools in their resident districts. Under a controlled choice program, all district schools are considered to be magnet schools and are, therefore, the direct responsibility of the districts so they must provide access and equity to all parents and students.

East Harlem's District 4 is an example of this option. Students choose among the different schools within that district. The schools offer different teaching formats and programs.

TEACHER-INITIATED SCHOOLS - School systems where the teachers have established a school that has an open-admission policy.

District 4 of East Harlem also is an example of teacher-initiated intradistrict choice.

SECOND CHANCE PLANS - Opportunity for dropouts or at-risk students to choose a school district or to participate in a post-secondary enrollment options program. These schools have specialized programs to reach students' specific needs.

VOUCHERS FOR PRIVATE INSTITUTIONS - Probably the most controversial of all choice plans, it entails the use of government funds to cover partial or total cost of private and/or religious school tuition if someone chooses to attend one of these schools. The President's America 2000 legislation includes private school choice where the vouchers would be provided through the conversion of Chapter 1 funds.

The Milwaukee school choice program uses vouchers which cover up to \$2500 of a child's tuition and expenses. Of their 20 private schools, 7 participated; 2 dropped from the program midway through the year.

POSTSECONDARY OPTIONS PROGRAM - Where eligible secondary students can enroll part or full-time in a postsecondary institution. The coursework can be used for high school and future college credit. The tuition for the cost of the postsecondary coursework is covered by the local educational agency.

Minnesota offers this option as part of their choice program.

Legislative Update: A choice of choice bills

Choice, considered a key method of education reform, has attracted significant attention recently. Although many schools have experimented locally with school choice, experiencing mixed results, President Bush and Massachusetts Senator Kennedy have, through legislation, elevated the subject to national significance.

President Bush has included choice as the cornerstone in his America 2000 package, Senate bill 1141. Senator Kennedy, chairman of the Senate Labor and Human Resource Committee, subsequently initiated Senate bill 1136, the Public School Choice Act of 1991. These choice bills, although both concentrating on opening boundaries, differ in their strategies for choice plans and their internal checks.

Although school choice is only one of the nine titles in the omnibus America 2000 legislation, it clearly is an administration priority. It is believed to be the foundation for many of the other reforms included in America 2000 because, as stated in the findings, sec.501(1), it "creates market-based accountability, encourages school diversity and competition and provides parents and their children with a sense of investment in their schools."

President Bush offers a private school choice plan which would amend Chapter 1 of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 so that Chapter 1 funds, which are currently allocated to schools based on the numbers of disadvantaged children they serve, would either follow the child to their new school or the parents would receive a per-child share of the Chapter 1 funds. These funds would function as vouchers in private schools; transportation costs would be inclusive.

Senator Kennedy's bill is strictly a public choice bill. This initiative authorizes the Secretary of Education to award grants on a competitive basis to eligible entities to plan, operate, and expand a parental choice program, including "particularly parents of educationally disadvantaged children." In their application, local educational agencies must assure that the choice program will not result

in segregation or impede the progress of desegregation. In addition, the applicant must meet eight other requirements to ensure that the choice program does not discriminate against racial and ethnic minorities and low income recipients. For example, applicants must be prepared to provide parent information and counseling, especially including outreach efforts to disadvantaged children, and a fair and equitable process must be used to select participants for programs which have more eligible applicants than space available. Parents and teachers must be involved at all stages of the program.

Kennedy's bill approaches choice cautiously, providing numerous criteria to protect the educationally disadvantaged and guide schools to remember their special needs. His criteria answer a number of the concerns brought up by education advocates, although no provision is made for to ensure access for limited-English proficient children. President Bush's choice bill has the potential to meet these criteria, yet it does not define them in its mission.

In the end, though, it is important to look beyond choice proposals to the overall package of education legislation. Where choice has been effective, it has been coupled with comprehensive improvements in the public education system.

President Bush has introduced the idea of funding 535 New American Schools to serve as models for school improvements while educating a sector of the community. Senator Kennedy has initiated Senate bill 1135, "Education USA", which would focus on upgrading existing urban and rural schools that agree to work out a plan for school reform. Both initiatives seek to address the need for comprehensive change to go along with choice. Their underlying philosophies, though, are quite different. President Bush's plan is predicated on the belief that models of excellence will stimulate imitation and healthy competition. Mr. Kennedy seeks to ensure that the schools currently at the largest disadvantage will have the resources they need to allow them to compete equitably. Some compromise on a federal school choice initiative will probably be reached in the next year. What philosophy will underlie it, and what safeguards it will contain, continue to be points of debate.

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